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Eminem Becomes Marshall Mathers For 'Popology'

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They say a well-rounded education is the key to success, and if that truly is the case, the my schooling is woefully incomplete when it comes to the subject of pop. That's why we bring you "Popology," the guide to modern radio-friendly stars as seen through the eyes of a guy who grew up on punk and metal. In case you missed previous installments, catch up with Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Christina Aguilera, Jessica Simpson, Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber and others here

This week, Eminem introduces us to his government name.

"Slim Shady does not give a f--- what you think." That's how Eminem's sophomore album *The Marshall Mathers LP* opens, and it's amazing how little his attitude has changed in the 10 years since that album was released. Eminem's new album *Recovery* -- which just hit stores this week -- represents a great deal of maturation for the man born Marshall Mathers. Sonically, it's far more complicated than his earlier work, but the real change is in the lyrics. The focus has shifted from wanton violence to a more personal, confessional air about his struggles with addiction and his longevity in the business. But above all else, Eminem is still the same singularity he was when he first burst onto the scene with *The Slim Shady LP*. He's still his own man with his own point of view on the world. He doesn't allow other people to influence him, for better or for worse. He still doesn't give a f--- what you think.

While *The Slim Shady LP* (and especially "My Name Is") was a success, it was *The Marshall Mathers LP* that turned Eminem into a pop superstar. "The Real Slim Shady" became and instant staple on "TRL," and the album sold nearly two million copies *in its first week of release* (it has moved over 19 million units worldwide). It topped the *Billboard* album chart for two months, which made it the clearly dominant release during a season that also saw high-profile albums by the likes of Britney Spears and *NSYNC move millions of albums. It is regularly cited as one of the best albums of the 2000s and one of the best hip-hop albums in history. It was a true phenomenon in a truly different time.

The Marshall Mathers LP is an incredible accomplishment, full of just about everything that makes Eminem unique. There are goofball joints ("The Real Slim Shady"), darkly cinematic stories ("Stan"), exercises in wordplay ("Who Knew"), aggro statements of purpose ("The Way I Am") and trippy experiments ("Drug Ballad"). There are also some great tag-teams and posse cuts, including "B---- Please II" (with guest rhymes from Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Xzibit and Nate Dogg) and "Under the Influence" (which represents the mainstream debut for Shady's posse D12).

It's also pretty violent. The album opens with "Kill You" (a warning to anybody threatening to cross him), but the savagery really peaks at "Kim," a raucous, dissonant fantasy about torturing and murdering ex-wife Kim Mathers (it essentially acts as a prequel to "'97 Bonnie and Clyde," the murder fantasy from *The Slim Shady LP*). While it does have a chorus crooned by Em, the verses are throat-tearing, psychotic rants that sometimes rhyme (but sometimes don't). It has to be one of the most aggressive, nakedly hateful tracks ever to be on an album that topped the *Billboard* album chart.

While Eminem abandons musicality on "Kim," the rest of the album is full of experiments and indulgences that really pushed the boundaries of what commercial hip-hop could sound like. "The Way I Am" spins a Gothic piano loop and bell chimes for a churning rocker of a track that is such a banger you don't realize how complicated Em's rhyme scheme is. "The Real Slim Shady" is a fantastic accomplishment, as it marries a bouncy, bubbly beat with some of Em's most lyrically complex bon mots. (Best line: "I probably got a couple of screws up in my head loose/ But no worse than what's going on in your parents' bedrooms/ But ometimes I want to get on TV and just let loose/ But can't/ But it's cool for Tom Green to hump a dead moose," a line that definitely dates the song but still makes me chuckle.)

The Marshall Mathers LP also features "Stan." No matter what you might think about Eminem, you have to agree that "Stan" is a pretty incredible construction. Written from the perspective of a crazed fan who slowly unravels over the course of a few letters (with Em taking the final verse), "Stan" instantly creates a dark alternate universe that allows the story to unfold and sneaks in a handful of details that truly flesh out the characters better than most mainstream films. All the while, Em never pulls back from the drama at hand. He keeps his tongue out of his cheek and the punchlines out of the song. Em has made plenty of other "serious" tunes ("Cleaning Out My Closet," "Lose Yourself"), but "Stan" is his most complete and vivid.

In all honesty, *The Marshall Mathers LP* is probably two or three songs too long. "Marshall Mathers" hits a lot of the same notes as "The Way I Am," while "Amityville" probably could have been left on the cutting room floor (especially considering D12's Biarre's guest rap isn't all that great). Still, it finishes pretty strong. After the chaos of "Kim," the album wraps up with "Under the Influence" (a nice little horrorcore posse cut) and "Criminal." That last song is a tremendous and epic-sounding album closer with a funky, haunting beat and some of Eminem's most high-speed raps. The song (and the album) ends with a single gun shot, which at the time people actually interpreted as Eminem subliminally announcing there would be no third album. All told, it's a fully-loaded batch of songs that hit on just about every aspect of Eminem's personality, and it accomplishes that with style and sonic excellence to spare.

Just about every other Eminem album skews too far in one direction (*The Eminem Show* is slightly too self-serious, *Encore* a bit too goofy and *Relapse* a tad too dark). His new album *Recovery* strikes an amazingly effective balance, making it his best album since *The Marshall Mathers LP*. Whether or not *Recovery* goes down in history the way *The Marshall Mathers LP* did (and it seems those odds are slim, mostly considering the state of the music industry compared to 10 years ago), Eminem can feel confident in the fact that no matter how his music has changed, his approach certainly hasn't. He does what he wants, and that happens to be good enough for his legions of fans.